

Police Academy 2259:
Luc Besson goes
NYPD Bleu



new adventure

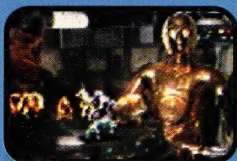
Flying hotels.
Dog-faced alien
mercenaries.
Pricey cutlery.
Bruce Willis. Is
The Fifth Element
the most incredible
film ever made?

story by ANDREW HARRISON

res in sci-fi

Solve problems you never knew you had with sci-fi movie gadgets

HOLOGRAPHIC CHESS IN *STAR WARS*



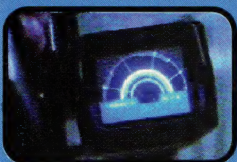
Entertaining solution to the boredom of long-haul intergalactic journeys. This holographic chess hybrid, enjoyed by R2D2 and Chewbacca aboard the Millennium Falcon, is played on an aluminium dartboard with animatronic Godzilla-like creatures who, rather than being removed from the gaming area, club each other to death. Unlikely to appear in shops this Christmas.

HOLOGRAPHIC TENNIS COACH IN *TOTAL RECALL*



Virtual tennis instructor promising instant solace for home-bound sports fans of the future. Ready to play at the touch of a button, the spandex-clad apparition even offers Sharon Stone continuous commentary on her every stroke – "Serve! Shoot! Perfect ball!" For anyone who experienced the tedium of Swingball.

HAND-HELD MOTION DETECTORS IN *ALIENS*



Ever wanted to know what was just around the corner? Try the radar-like motion scanners touted by Ripley and the crew of the Sulaco as they explore the surface of an alien-infested planet. Obvious strategic applications could be expanded to include parents wishing to keep tabs on unruly kids.

HAND-HELD BRAIN SCANNER IN *STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE*



Pocket CAT scan of great portability and ease of use. Practical effectiveness demonstrated on an injured Spock in the Enterprise →

ish French director Luc Besson and his problem child, *The Fifth Element*.

Today is screening day. Apart from Besson and a few high-ups in Columbia Pictures, no-one has seen his movie yet – not even its costume designer, our flamboyant Eurotrash friend Jean-Paul Gaultier, who has flown in from Paris and is wandering around the matt-black-and-oatmeal ante-chamber of the Sony Pictures screening room in a twitchy combination of eagerness and mild panic.

Today's audience of film writers from Europe, middle-ranking company people and tele-hacks from America's carnivorous teatime showbiz programmes will be the first to see *The Fifth Element* (the heavy-hitters having been prudently kept away for the moment, pending the buzz). The next will be the still more professionally sceptical front row at the Cannes Film Festival. That will consist of 50 movie directors just waiting for an excuse to walk out in a cine-strop like they did with *Crash*, and reputedly keener than ever to deliver a blow to big-deal mass-market filmmaking. Arms folded, Besson paces around a hospitality table of bagels and doughnuts, but does not take one.

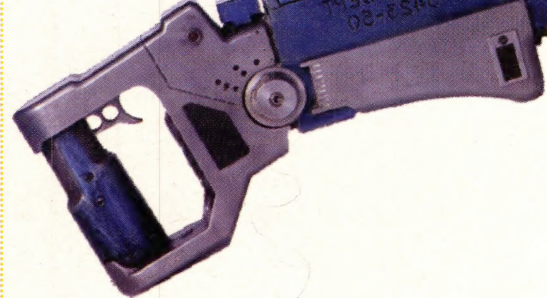
A quartet of statuesque, impossibly beautiful models in Gaultier's wet-dream air-hostess uniforms glide past like powder-blue S&M phantoms from *Space 1999*. They are each at least a foot taller than anyone else in the room. The girls are here for the *Entertainment Tonight* cameras – someone at Columbia has reasoned that *The Fifth Element* at least has sex going for it, so they'd better work that angle. Gaultier picks a loose thread or two off their padded shoulders, smooths platinum wigs; one of them drops her pill-box hat, and he has to retrieve it because the leatherette mini-skirt he has made for her is so tight she can't bend over. Besson chats with the models in a gentlemanly fashion but appears to wish they were elsewhere. Part of him wants to get this mini-gala press launch over quickly, and with a paradoxical minimum of fuss.

Besson's nerves seem well-founded. Although *The Fifth Element* has been – God bless these marketing euphemisms – 'shrouded in mystery', initial reports indicated that it is in fact a blockbuster gone mad. Effects-laden to the tune of \$90m and the most expensive French-financed movie ever, it has no easily digestible hook (thus violating Blockbuster Rule 1: No-one goes to a summer movie to be surprised) and even this morning, as the air hostesses summon us into the screening room, no-one has a clue as to what *The Fifth Element* is actually about. The trailers have simply asked the non-committal question "What is the Fifth Element?" and movie-marketing logic dictates that, if you've got anything worth anything at all, you stuff it into the trailer until the trailer is fit to burst. A \$90m movie needs a single \$90m idea. Here, there is nothing.

The Fifth Element's nominal star Bruce Willis, meanwhile, can open a *Die Hard*, but that's about it, and its supporting cast of a cute unknown (Milla Jovovich) and a swivel-eyed loose cannon (Gary Oldman) seem calculated to make this the most costly art-house picture yet. Its director is French (Blockbuster Rule 2: Nothing foreign, never) and best known for the ultra-cool modern-noir action thrillers *Leon* and *Nikita*. There are rumours that its effects budget was out of control and that the presence of Willis was distorting the movie from science-fiction epic into doomed star



Fröck of ages: Chris Tucker as DJ Ruby Rhod and friend



"we put the money on the screen, for people to see"

vehicle (Blockbuster Rule 2a: Remember *Judge Dredd*). Its chief production-design inspiration is the avant-garde French comics artist Moebius. And it's got fashion in it: probably the ultimate turn-off for the hotdog-gnawing Beavises whose fun-buttons every blockbuster must press (Blockbuster Rule 3: Nothing gay, never).

As they finish up their coffees and settle down, the journos are adding up all of this, factoring in the PR paranoia and the dolly-birds and the fact that *The Fifth Element* flies in the face of all Hollywood wisdom, and coming to a conclusion: It's going to be shit.

"I've heard it's *Showgirls In Outer Space*."

"I've heard it's *Gold-Diggers Of 3001*."

"*Stargate* with tits."

"*Waitressworld!*"

"*Pret-A-Teleporter!*"

Two hours later, sitting at a press conference table and flanked by their turquoise space Valkyries, Luc Besson and Jean-Paul Gaultier are grinning the grins of vindicated men. Questions are slow because their audience is dumbfounded: *The Fifth Element* is something these seen-it-all people have never seen before. In the course of the movie, they have been battered with high-gloss action movie ordnance, but also hypnotised by the most fully realised fictional world seen on a movie screen in 15 years. Even Gaultier, who's used to fabulousness-intoxication, can hardly contain himself. His chief comment, in heavily Francophone English: "It was, uh, a big surprise for me, as for you too."

The reason there has been no single-issue high-concept sell is now obvious. *The Fifth Element* is really ten movies compacted into one – a philosophical arthouse sci-fi-action-comedy-romance-epic, unified by a sharp, funny European sensibility. The story is simplicity itself: every 5,000 years, a vast field of evil energy spills into our universe and tries to



It's Milla time: Jovovich as Leeloo



Elemental, my dear Besson: Dallas (Bruce Willis) tries to work out if it's earth, air, fire or water.



Mercenary position: The alien gun-for-hire Mangalores track down the Fifth Element

exterminate all life. The only thing that can combat it is the long-lost ultimate weapon, the Fifth Element. And the only person who can find and protect the Fifth Element is cashiered-soldier-turned-cab-driver Korben Dallas, played by Bruce Willis in the style of Bruce Willis. The Fifth Element itself proves to be not a doomsday device but Jovovich's beautiful humanoid girl, Leeloo, with enhanced DNA, orange hair and a voice half-way between Björk and that bird-kid from the G-Force cartoons. Gary Oldman is an arms dealer with a Hitler haircut who wants to kill her. Love saves the day on several occasions. As studio spending orgies go, it's pretty cool.

This is a portmanteau myth, a modern composite with enough resonances to make it seem eternal – just like *Star Wars*. Besson uses it to take the film out into space, into the past and future and the depths of what makes humans tick. And of course around New York: the screaming streets of *The Fifth Element's* Manhattan stretch off into infinity, not just horizontally but vertically (it's a European's first heart-stopping vision of the Manhattan street system, expanded exponentially, and it's about to join Ridley Scott's future LA as one of the great future worlds). *The Fifth Element* is Besson's grand tour of the universe and it makes the twin towers of modern science fiction – *Star Wars* and *Blade Runner* – look rather anaemic and humourless by comparison.

"The first step of the story comes when I was 16," Besson is telling the press conference, relieved. "Living in France. The country of cheese. I am very bored. So I take my pen and I create this world. I take a lot of pleasure to invent the system. So, even when I have the hero living in an apartment in New York, I ask myself, Why does he rent it? Why not buy? I have it down even to these details.

"I organise the society and I write the future, ten years at a time, so when I come to write the real story, it is ready. The actual story of *The Fifth Element* only comes about five years ago. I have lived a little more and life has given me some... smacks? I have seen more. It gives you the skin of a crocodile. So now I want to make a movie that says, 'Why save life when you see what we do with it?'"

It all seems so simple. There is no \$90m idea. There are 90 \$1m ideas instead, cramming the screen with invention, thrills and humour. It's *Ben Hur* in space, a blockbuster with a brain but a heart as well. For Hollywood, this is as revolutionary as talkies.

Gaultier leans into the microphone and tells one small story of how *The Fifth Element's* budget nearly went insane. Besson looks down and screws up his face with

embarrassment. There is an opera scene on the paradise planet of Fhloston, and Jean-Paul had designed costumes for each and every one of the interplanetary dignitaries present: pop stars, emperors, businessmen, princesses. One outfit, which would be onscreen for maybe ten seconds, featured a detail of knives sewn down its breast. Jean-Paul designed it, thinking the costumiers would dig out some old knives from a prop room or flea market. But no. In awe of the great Gaultier, they had contracted one of Europe's best model makers to sculpt the knives, and cast them in exactly to Jean-Paul's sketch. Bill for knives: \$10,000. Bill for costume: \$50,000. In his own friendly, restrained way, Besson had had a fit. This was when he realised he had to work at the interface of fashion and movies: the two most profligate and starstruck industries on earth.

It was an attitude that was infectious. Later I talk to the film's visual effects supervisor, Mark Stetson – of effects house Digital Domain – who also did the visuals for budget nightmares *True Lies*, *Total Recall* and *Waterworld*. He talks about the obsessive detail of the Manhattan scenes.

"A movie like this and an environment like that, you just keep adding and adding and adding," he says. "You never stop. If you look closely, there are people in all the windows and all the signs on the streets are real. Even the traffic is pretty humorous. I'm in there. Scott Ross, the President of Digital Domain, is playing saxophone in one of the windows too. I think the Laserdisc fans are going to have a real treat."

"I have a relationship to the money that is very clear," Luc Besson is saying. "When we spend the money, it is to give it back. We put the money on the screen, for people to see. We transform this big bill into art. And that's the most beautiful thing, to turn this stupid piece of paper into art. What, the money should stay in Switzerland? Or buy more weapons?"

It sounds a lot better with a French accent – honest. Maybe because Hollywood has driven apart the notions of art and blockbusting success so efficiently that you can't imagine an American filmmaker seriously entertaining such an idea – not when Joel Schumacher is making his 'wild rides'. *The Fifth Element's* combination of hyper-reality and grit (when people get hurt here, they hurt) →



Fringe element: Gary Oldman as arms-dealing bad guy Zorg

→ sick bay, where one of Dr McCoy's assistants examines his Vulcan brain-waves with the pen-sized pointer. Domestic diagnosis of neural disorders makes this a future must-buy for armchair hypochondriacs.

INSTANT PUDDING IN SLEEPER



An advance in freeze-dried food technology. Disguised as an android butler, epoch-travelling Woody Allen discovers the potential of Instant Pudding when, after pouring a few granules into a tin, he adds water and precipitates an eruption of sludge. A loaves-and-fishes remedy for global hunger?

ON-STREET EGO BOOSTER IN DEMOLITION MAN



Problem: "I don't feel there's anything special about me." Solution: "You're a sensitive man who inspires joy in those around you!" The Compu Chat console offers New Age psychological reassurance to the insecure residents of 2032. An eerily prophetic digital solution to paranoid urban nightmares.

HOVERBOARDS IN BACK TO THE FUTURE II

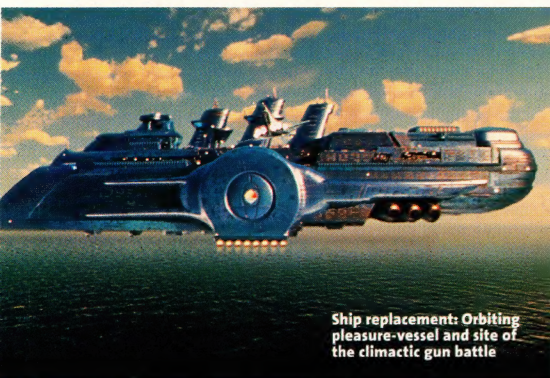


Levitation offered by a day-glo plastic board. Floats six inches above the ground without the aid of moving parts, thus ensuring a quick getaway for time-traveller Michael J Fox when menaced by 21st century hoodlums. Essential equipment for skate freaks tired of wiping out on manhole covers.

SEX PILL IN BARBARELLA



Post-AIDS sex surrogate which reduces human contact to touching palms. Jane Fonda proves a convert after taking the pill proffered by David Hemmings. Severe implications for procreation would render this much-



Ship replacement: Orbiting pleasure-vessel and site of the climactic gun battle



23rd-century fox: Jovovich escapes another nasty encounter with the St Johns ambulance brigade

know how that didn't work either. The big difference between this and *Blade Runner*," says Besson, "is that *Blade Runner* is at night, with smoke and rain and darkness. It's hard for the audience. This is noon. You don't see one car – you see 400. You can see everything."

Besson yawns a little and stretches back on the beige sofa at the back of the Sony screening theatre. He is a roundish man with a flecky tan and mildly bleached hair, both of which suggest he spends a lot of time in the real outdoors, rather than on a tanning bed. He's wearing a shapeless grey sweatshirt, baggy pants and ancient leather clogs. He looks like he should be renting you a deckchair on a beach somewhere.

Movie-making is Besson's second choice of career. He really wanted to be a deep-sea diver. His parents were diving instructors around the Mediterranean, and the young Besson would follow his father from Club Med to Club Med, deep-sea diving, wasting time, living in his imagination. When he was ten, in 1969, he had an undersea encounter with a dolphin which convinced him he wanted to study the sea and its ecology. Seven years later, he had an accident while diving. Doctors told him he could never dive again.

Besson dropped out of school and began experimenting with a Super-8 camera, trying to edge into the French film industry. After a three-month stay in Los Angeles, he began to get work as an assistant director. In 1983, he won a César nomination and a few minor awards for his own first feature *The Last Battle* (humans squabbling in post-apocalyptic black and white). His next film, *Subway* (surreal new-wave goings-on in the Paris *métro*), secured a few more César nominations and renown for cultish oddness. *The Big Blue* (sub-aquatic fable) and *Nikita* (junkie-turned-assassin tries to escape government control) followed. The movies shared deliberately sketchy characters and a tone of amused detachment. *Nikita* made Besson's name in America, and finally gave a full-on starring role to Anne Parillaud. The love affair between her and Besson fell apart soon afterwards and it seems that this drove Besson deeper into his films.

By now Besson was France's most successful director. When *Nikita* was bowdlerised into Hollywood schlock as *The Assassin*, with Bridget Fonda in the starring role, it only threw his own incisive style into sharp relief. His films were hip, stylish and potent; and he got more out of oddballs like Jean Reno and Christopher Lambert than most directors could. None of which was really good enough reason to give him a budget the like of which he had never seen – \$90m – and let him indulge the biggest space fantasy ever pro-

duced. It took him the year to get it made, under way, so long that he turned away from its widescreen gigantism altogether and made *Leon* instead. This was his other, low-key New York movie, in which a lonely contract killer played by Besson favourite Jean Reno protects Natalie Portman's precocious orphan girl. The whipcrack violence and dangerous sexual undercurrent of the movie seemed still less likely to propel its director towards a *Star Wars* for the '90s.

"It is a cycle," Besson says, in the kind of leap-of-reason Cantona-isms that characterise his speech. "*Leon* was very dark – it was the dark side of me and I try to go very far with myself in my films. So after *Leon* I wanted to be light, to have fun, to propose something to people. I wanted to say, You know what, let's dream about another world. I know it is shit all around the planet, but let's have some hope, or we're gonna die."

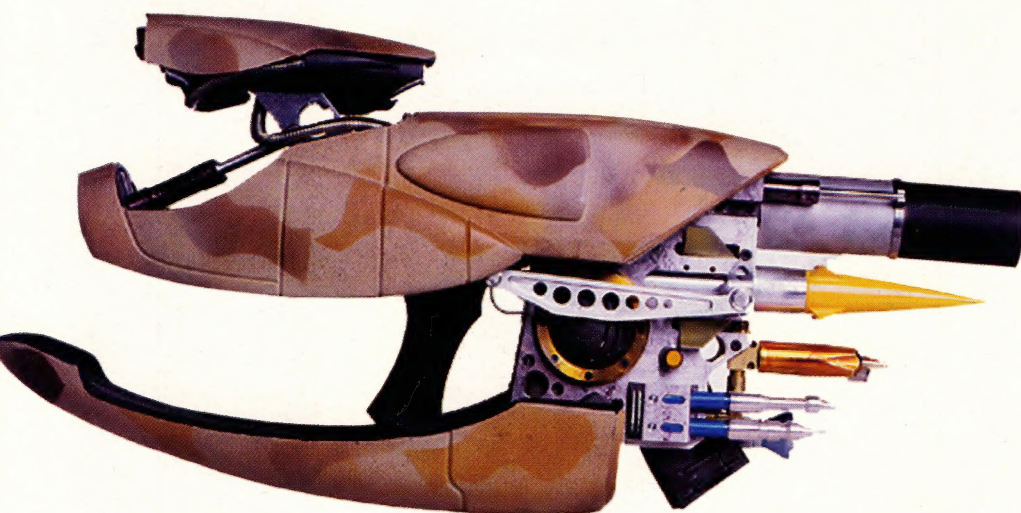
Did he never fear that he'd taken on something that would inevitably go beyond his control? That the budget would balloon, that the presence of Bruce Willis would inevitably bend the picture out of shape?

"No. Never. I always knew. Because every decision we make is about one little piece at a time. You don't lose control of the picture for every one little piece. We had two rules that everyone had to accept from the start. One was that the star of the movie is the movie. Nobody else, even me, even Bruce. We had to be totally, 100 per cent devoted to him: the movie. From everyone, you ask for that commitment."

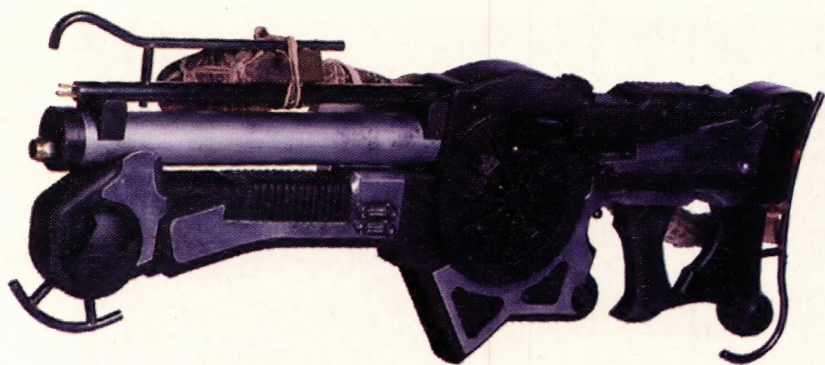
"The second is that all the ego has to stay home. No names on seats, no special caravans or parking spots – if you don't know my face and you come on the set, it will take you easily ten minutes to know who is the director. You will just see 200 guys running everywhere, with so much energy, and you will not be able to see a guy on a tall tower surrounded by girls and assistants. For everyone, it is like... when you have the crew of a ship sailing across the Atlantic? Once you are in the boat, you can't get out."

Besson talks with the mildly jittery tone of someone who can't quite believe the film is finished – he only completed it three weeks ago. He says it had taken Willis five years to come round to reading the script, but when he did, he agreed to do the movie within two hours ("We don't go straight to Bruce because Bruce is very expensive and we wanted to put all of the money into the movie. But then we realise he wants to be *in* the movie, not *be* the movie").

He's viewing the press trawl with trepidation. Already, today, people have started talking about *The Fifth Element's* unmistakable French flavour and it's starting to get on his nerves.



"Living in France. The country of cheese. I am very bored. So I create this world..."



"And this is my Shirley Bassey..." An alien diva prepares to sing the blues

"Why we have to show the flag when we make a movie, I don't know," he says sadly. "The only, last country with no frontiers and borders is art. It is an open country. Everyone can come. Why do all these people spend their time to put back the frontier?"

The thing is, he's wrong. Movies is a country where the only frontiers that matter are the ones of America, and they're expanding all the time. Besson may not feel like *The Fifth Element* is a French movie, but stand it next to *Independence Day* and its mixture of surreal humour and out-right sexiness are elaborately European. More importantly, it's just not Hollywood.

"But what is a Hollywood movie?" says Besson, on his way to catch a cab. "We say 'a Hollywood movie' as if Hollywood is a person, but it isn't. Stanley Kubrick or Martin Scorsese or Fellini have a universe that they describe. They talk with their hearts and their roots, and their movies look like the person that made them. And Hollywood looks like nothing."

Do his movies look like him? He looks down at his floppy sweatshirt and makes a comic face of disgust. "Sure!"

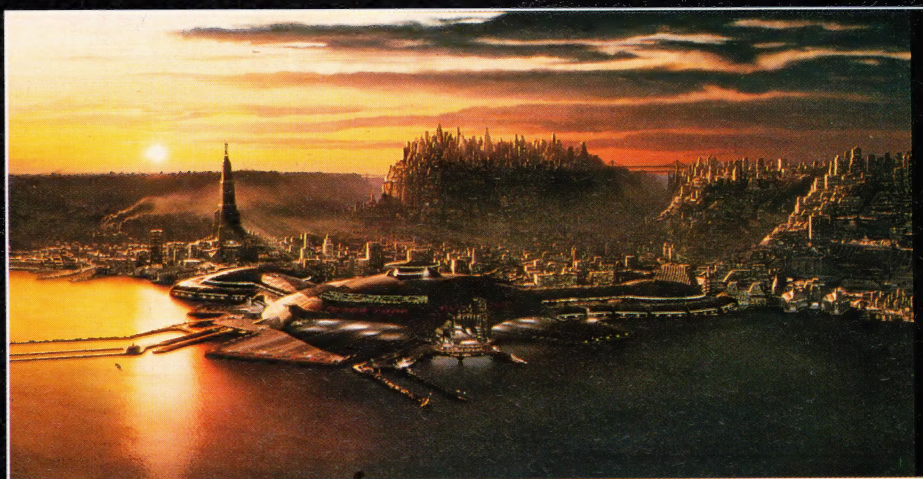
the *Fifth Element* has entered the American Top Ten at Number One a couple of weeks later, when Milla Jovovich rings from Los Angeles. She's tired and she's so sorry she's late, but she's been reading for another part - no, she can't say what it is. She, too, only saw *The Fifth Element* in finished form relatively recently, at a hastily scheduled preview in LA. "I thought that it was insane," she confesses. "It kind of blew me away. And I'm in it."

Milla Jovovich is the 21-year-old Russian-born actress-model-singer whom Besson decided is a dead ringer for the perfect human being. As luck would have it, British viewers will have seen her first movie recently on ITV recently: the hopelessly cheesy *Return To The Blue Lagoon*, in which she played the daughter of the original Brooke Shields/Jean Simmons character and had to go through the sexual-awakening-on-a-desert-island shtick again. Critical derision had been total; Milla salvaged her pain by modelling for Calvin Klein, and later secured parts in *Kuffs* (opposite Christian Slater), *Chaplin* (with Robert Downey Jr) and *Dazed And Confused*. She recorded her own album - 'Milla: The Divine Comedy' - and now she's working on the follow-up. Milla Jovovich has one of those well-I-guess-it's-cool-but-I-don't-know-whatsoever singsong voices that America's young and cool do so well. She is extremely pretty, in the skinny way of the moment.

For the screen test, which she failed at first, and then the role of Leeloo, Besson admits he tortured her with endless extreme directions. Jovovich went the distance, even going so far as to learn Leeloo's alien Björk-talk as a language, rather than phonetically. Besson said her professionalism was almost alarming. Her reward is



Evening stress: Uncharacteristically, Willis decides to pick up a big gun and shoot everybody



drain man

Digital Domain's Mark Stetson on why he took all the water out of Manhattan

"The look of the City was one of the key ways we used to convey a little of *The Fifth Element's* backstory, if moviegoers are looking for it. The basic premise of the world the movie takes place in is that in the 23rd century, mankind is still a working society - kind of creaky and not too different from today - but it has moved out into the

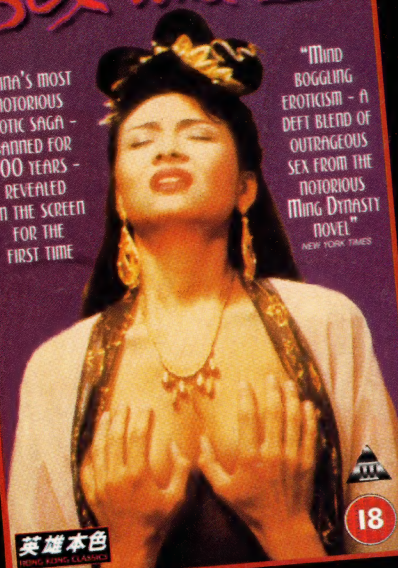
colonise other worlds by terra-forming them. We've harvested water from the Earth and taken it out to use on other planets. So the sea levels on Earth have fallen, and rather than keep building upwards, man has started tunneling down, excavating space out of the Earth. That's why, when Leeloo looks downwards for the first time, New

"The look and the story are all coherent. The reason New York looks the way it does, and the fact that the human race is in space, are intrinsically linked. Old Manhattan, the Williamsburg Bridge and the Statue of Liberty haven't been raised up on pedestals. They're where they've always been. The sea has fallen

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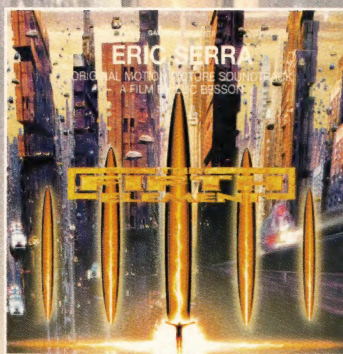


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some Mangalore space terrorists with her bare hands, and she gets to kiss Bruce Willis.

What made Milla Jovovich think she was right for the role of the perfect human being?

"Ohhh... nothing," she mutters. "The main thing was the opportunity to work with Luc Besson. When I tested for the part I was desperate to get it, even though I didn't fully know what I was testing for. But Leeloo is so great because, as an actress, she gives me nothing to go on. She's an alien space girl. She's a completely new person who's just been born: she's had no experience of other people, she speaks an ancient language, she doesn't know anything about the

world of humans. "We had to invent her from nothing and in a way, she kind of inspired me to throw away a lot of my ways of behaving. You spend some time as an alien person, and you do start to see human thinking differently."

Was Bruce Willis a good kisser?

"Aaah! Oh, he's not bad. Kissing him was crazy. I was a little frightened. But you have to do what you have to do."

And then she goes, off to the next reading and the album - she's wondering about making it in London. Some days later, a story concerning Milla will emerge on the American showbiz news stories. As if to echo *Nikita*, the movie which con-

vinced America that Besson mattered, and where his relationship with Anne Parillaud broke up, the tabloid shows allege that Jovovich and Besson had a brief affair on the set of *The Fifth Element*.

In New York, I had asked Besson why he had chosen her for the part of Leeloo. "Two things," he had said. "Her voice - she can sing - but also her face. She is from the past and also the future at the same time. She can be Nefertiti and she can be from the 21st Century."

If the American TV stories are true, it shows an impressive attention to detail in Besson's recreation of old-style Hollywood epic-making. Not even George Lucas went that far. **N**

Luc's familiar

Anything in *The Fifth Element* look like you've seen it before?



STARGATE

Roland Emmerich, 1994
Turn-of-the-century Egyptian prologue featuring long-lost alien artefact.



DUNE

David Lynch, 1984
Violent cameo appearance by fashionable pop star.

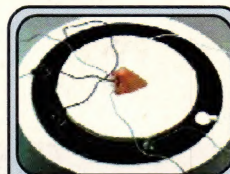
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Roland Emmerich, 1996
Arrival of enormous evil-looking spaceships presaged by enormous evil-looking shadows.

ALIEN 3
David Fincher, 1992
Cast of highly paid Yank superstars filled out by half the population of British Equity.



THE ADVENTURES OF BARON MUNCHAUSEN

Terry Gilliam, 1988
Appearance by John Neville.



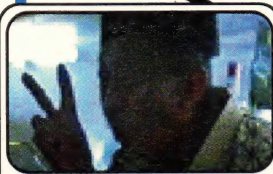
SLEEPER

Woody Allen, 1973
Futuristic ability to clone entire bodies from disembodied extremities.



TWELVE MONKEYS

Terry Gilliam, 1995
Starring appearance by Bruce Willis as crop-haired world saviour.



BLADE RUNNER

Ridley Scott, 1982
High-profile advertising by possibly soon-to-be bankrupt international mega-corporations. And McDonald's. Genetically engineered scissor-kicking lead female character. Proliferation of kindly old noodle salesmen. Airborne cars. Brain-fritzing multicultural cityscape. Appearance by Brion James.



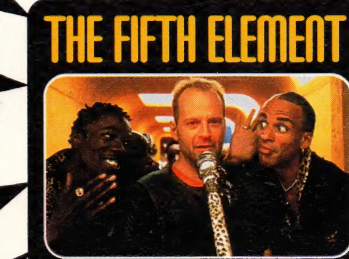
ALIENS

James Cameron, 1986
Living accommodation restricted to white one-room plastic apartments. Lead character reluctantly shanghaied by military industrial complex into battling evil extraterrestrials.



BRAZIL

Terry Gilliam, 1985
Appearance by Ian Holm. Futuristic police policy of bunging suspects in big black bags.



THE FIFTH ELEMENT

BATMAN

Tim Burton, 1989
Conviction that Prince-style funk workouts will be the music du jour of the future.

ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK

John Carpenter, 1981
Exponential increase in the future likelihood of finding a kindly, English-speaking New York cabbie.



ALIEN

Ridley Scott, 1979
Appearance by Ian Holm. Presence of cat used to demonstrate ass-kicking action hero's gentle side.



MOONRAKER

Lewis Gilbert, 1979
Post-plot debrief by government potentates postponed due to hero/heroine mattress action.



2001

Stanley Kubrick, 1968
Entire plot powered by search for useless-looking bricks.

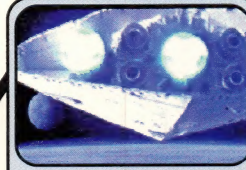


TOTAL RECALL

Paul Verhoeven, 1990
Failure of face-changing technology at crucial spaceport check-in desk moment.



ICE



STAR WARS

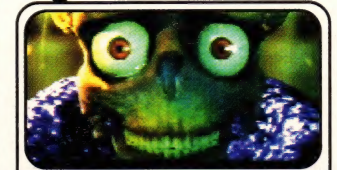
George Lucas, 1977
Opening credits run against backdrop of slow-moving



CITY OF LOST CHILDREN

PRINCE OF DARKNESS

John Carpenter, 1987
'True history' of mankind maintained by a community of highly secretive religious managers.



ROBO-ATTACK

In the wake of Tim Burton's underachieving *Mars Attacks!*, major studio bean counters must have been clear on one thing. Maverick arty director times alien invasion movie plus vast wedge is not the kind of equation that anyone in a suit wants to know the answer to. Except they were too late. Because, while Burton was deciding which highly paid cameo performer to fry next, some joker decided to stump up for Luc Besson's \$90m *The Fifth Element*. Then again, with *Nikita* and *Leon*, Besson proved he could handle action – and *The Fifth Element* does feature Bruce in a vest. It's a natty, Gaultier-designed vest. But it's still a vest. In other words, we're talking *Die Hard* in space. Right?

No. *The Fifth Element* is many things, including probably the greatest film spectacle you will see this year, but it's not *Die Hard* in space. Like most of Besson's films, it's hard to say what it is. The opening seems tailored for the sci-fi/horror market as a planet-sized sphere of Pure Evil heads for 25th-century Earth. But one of the earliest scenes to feature Willis has his ex-army New York cabbie secreting so many people in beds and fridges that you sit there waiting for him to lose his trousers just as the vicar comes round for tea.

Then there's Gary Oldman. He's a nasty man, dealing arms to huge, grunting dog-alien in between helping the aforementioned Pure Evil to wipe out all living things – but, hell, this is Gary Oldman. What do you expect him to do? Bake muffins? But he's got this bit of clear plastic on his head for no good reason and a weird Deep South accent and a scene in which he almost chokes on a cherry stone. Is he supposed to be frightening? Hilarious? Texan? And would it be more or less easy to tell if Oldman's chief lieutenant wasn't played by Tricky? Or if the saviour of humanity wasn't represented by the elastoplast-clad form of Milla Jovovich?

It's clear from fairly early on that the truth, or indeed much in the way of plot, is not out here. But Besson's extravagant, occasionally absurd but consistently retina-searing imagination definitely is. From the director's total realisation of New York – finally eclipsing *Blade Runner* as definitive futurescape – to the climactic Willis/alien ballistics, he not only provides bang-for-buck but also doesn't deviate from his own brilliantly twisted vision. Anyone worried that big budget-filmmaking has ruined Besson can rest assured. Whether Besson will ruin big-budget filmmaking remains to be seen. ■■■■ CLARK COLLIS



Why composer Eric Serra just keeps going back for more...

Luc Besson is a legendary perfectionist. How has this affected you?

It hasn't. I'm like that too. I prefer to work with someone like that than with someone who doesn't care. It's always hard work with Luc, and you only get a few hours' sleep, but it's cool and you're usually happy at the end. Half-dead. But happy.

He's very secretive, too...

Yeah, he is, but not with me. We're best friends, so usually I'm one of the first people to become aware of his projects. He sometimes tells me the story even before he's actually written it down.

How does he communicate his ideas for the soundtrack?

He considers music to be one of the main characters in his movies. He directs me as he would an actor – we talk about emotion, sentiment. The discussions are very abstract. But we've known each other for 20 years, so to us the conversations seem very precise, even if we're talking about something as abstract as love. For example, sometimes he would tell me to place the audience inside a character with the music.

How did you meet each other?

We were 18 and met in a recording studio. I was playing guitar on an album by a band whose singer was a friend of his. They weren't happy

with the guitars on the album and as a session guitarist – I'd been playing guitar since I was five – I was brought in to change it. Luc was impressed to see a young guy come in and improvise like that. As far as he was concerned, that meant I could be a composer. A few months later he did his first short film and asked me to do the music. I said, "I'm not a composer." He said, "Yeah, sure you are." Since then I've done all his movies.

What do you think of the *Trainspotting* approach to soundtracks?

To me, it shouldn't be called a soundtrack. It's just a marketing thing; I prefer original music. I'm an artist – marketing is not my business. If you ask me what I think about this as an artist, I think it's ridiculous. It can work, like on *Saturday Night Fever*, but more and more it's just for marketing.

What's your favourite Besson film?

Each movie has been a beautiful adventure, but I couldn't say which one I prefer, because I'm not comparing the movies, I'm comparing the adventures. It's like having seven children – you don't have one favourite, you like them all.

What do you think of *The Fifth Element*'s mixed reception?

I don't care. Someone who hates this movie is just too old... no, not too old, he has problems. No, really, I think so. It's not an intellectual movie, it's just two hours of cool entertainment. If you don't like it, you have a problem.

GARETH GRUNDY



Muttley crew:
"Anybody seen the AA guide?"

he played. Marlon Brando allegedly just picks whatever script is on top of the pile. Harvey Keitel clearly uses a less surefire method of decision-making – allowing a sickly child to pick whichever one flies out of a revolving tombola, perhaps. Given that the first line of the *City Of Industry* synopsis is: "After an elaborate jewellery robbery goes wrong..." he obviously gave it to someone else to read as well.

However, despite the obviousness of the plot – robbery goes wrong, Timothy Hutton dies, Harvey seeks revenge – *City...* is somehow miraculously redeemed by the excellence of its central performances and the must-see dreadfulness of the the ever-appalling Dorff. Turning in another one of his method performances, he plays 'the unpredictable Skip Kovitch', a getaway driver whose sole character trait appears to be a penchant for those leather driving gloves that misinformed children bought their dad for Christmas in 1977. ■■■■

ANDREW MALE



DRIFTING CLOUDS

Director Aki Kaurismaki **Stars** Kati Outinen, Kari Vaananen **Certificate** 15 **Running Time** 1hr 36 **Out** Now

So this is what passes for a feelgood movie in Finland. Lauri (Vaananen) and Ilona (Outinen) are a nice middle-aged couple: he drives a tram, she's head waitress in a fine old restaurant. Then he loses his job, she loses her job, and they lose all their furniture. When he thinks that he's got a new job, he fails the medical. When she gets a new job, her boss turns out to be a gangster and Lauri

is savagely beaten when he tries to collect Ilona's pay. That said, there is comedy in the sheer relentlessness of the vodka-soaked misery, but it's the very darkest kind. And although it has little of the deadpan daftness that made Kaurismaki's *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* a cult, this is a neat little effort, complete with improbable happy ending. Even if it does make Finland seem as appealing as gangrene. ■■■■

MARK MORRIS

INTIMATE RELATIONS

Director Philip Goodhew **Stars** Julie Walters, Rupert Graves, Laura Sadler **Certificate** 15 **Running time** 1hr 39 **Out** June 20

1954. A provincial town where immorality takes place behind drawn curtains. Harold Guppy (Graves), a sailor who sucks on sweets to calm his violent tendencies, becomes a lodger in the small terraced house belonging to Mrs Beasley (Walters). Stuck in a loveless marriage, the lustful

landlady is soon tempting the handsome young newcomer into her den of iniquity. When her 14-year-old daughter (Sadler) insists on watching, however, the problems mount – from obsession to blackmail to murder. Based on a true story, this could have proved fascinating. Sadly, it's frustratingly mild-mannered, only hinting, in true Blighty fashion, at the full, sordid story. And the 'devastating' denouement is handled so clumsily, it makes the prospect of Michael Winner's next movie seem strangely, almost sexually, enticing. ■■■■ NICK DUERDEN

